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Energizing, Directing, and Sustaining Motivation in a Social Studies Program

David L. Griffin, Sr.

How many of us have postponed beginning a diet or exercise program because we were too busy, too stressed, or because it was, well... Wednesday? Or, we begin a diet or exercise program with complete dedication, but after a period of time, we become less and less diligent about following through on our regimen. In each case, motivation, or a lack thereof, is a significant factor in the unsuccessful realization of our goals.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that students often lack the motivation to reach certain educational goals. This fact is perhaps most apparent in students of the social studies. In reviewing several empirical studies, Shaughnessy and Haladyna (1985) found that, at all grade levels, students reported social studies to be one of the least interesting, most irrelevant subjects in the school curriculum. Several hypotheses were offered to explain students' lack of interest in the social studies. Some claimed that the content seemed unrelated to students' lives and held much less importance for their career purposes than mathematics or English. Others asserted that students' attitudes were affected negatively by their perceptions of the learning environment (student-teacher relationships, teacher enthusiasm). Finally, poor, repetitive instructional techniques were blamed for the negative attitudes held by students (Massialas & Allen, 1996).

What, then can be done to build a more motivating social studies program for students? Perhaps a first step is to examine the term "motivation" to obtain a better understanding of the concept. While there are innumerable definitions of the word "motivation", three components seem to emerge. Motivation is that which energizes, directs, and sustains behavior (Steers & Porter, 1983).

The primary component of motivation is the energizing function. That is what causes people to act, to initiate a particular behavior so that, for example, learning can take place. Without being energized, students would never engage in a task, much less complete it.

The directing function of motivation acknowledges the existence of a specific goal and implies that by engaging in a particular behavior, that goal is likely to be realized. In other words, the behavior has a purpose. Students who are directed know what they want to accomplish, believe they have the ability to be successful, and understand that they must behave in a certain way to achieve their goal. Less motivated students either do not know what their goal is, do not feel they have the ability, or do not believe their behaviors will direct them toward accomplishing their goal.

Finally, the sustaining role of motivation is that which helps people persist in the behavior necessary to achieve a goal. Successful students sustain their goal-directed behavior, always trying innovative, potentially more successful approaches to accomplishing their task at hand. During the "sustaining" part of motivation, feedback is critical for helping students know whether their goal is closer to being achieved.

These three components, energizing, directing, and sustaining are vital if a social studies program is to be motivating. Recall the hypotheses that were given to explain the negative perceptions held by students toward social studies. One hypothesis suggested the content was not perceived as being very relevant or valuable. Thus, it would seem there was little to energize students to set goals and initiate behaviors necessary to be successful. Other hypotheses suggested that the interactions between teacher and students negatively affected the learning environment. Without positive student/teacher relationships, students would lack the motivating direction provided by teachers. Not only might students lack an understanding of the teacher's objective or goal of the lesson, but they also, no doubt, would fail to comprehend the implication that their behaviors have a purpose in achieving that goal. Remember, too, that poor, repetitive instructional strategies influenced students' perceptions of social studies. It is difficult to sustain goal-directed behaviors when students are bored and are not involved in the learning process.

Clearly, then, a motivating social studies program must address not only what is taught, but also how it is taught. No program can be successful without considering content, interactions, and strategies. And, in improving each of those aspects, we cannot lose sight of the three components of motivation described earlier. Content in a social studies program, then must be energizing, directing, and sustaining. The interactions that occur between teachers and students must be energizing, directing, and sustaining. And, of course, the same is true for strategies utilized by teachers to deliver the content. The following gives some ideas of how to merge the three important aspects of a social studies program with the three components of motivation.

Content

A key element in energizing students about the content of a social studies program is for the teacher to be enthusiastic and energetic both in delivery and demeanor. Before students can be energized, they must be set on fire by what the teacher says and does. Social Studies teachers must convey that the content covered in their course is relevant to the students' lives. For example, history provides the backdrop for understanding how events and issues have influenced the students' lives. Governmental decisions affecting national and global societies have created a world both of opportunity and peril for students. The cultural groups that are studied can give new meaning to the students' sense of self as similarities and differences in ideologies and customs are explored. While these examples serve to provide a framework for making the content of social studies relevant to students' lives, not all students will see the connection to their particular situation. In those cases, teachers must allow students to ask the question, "How is this relevant to me?" And, equally important, teachers must give a deserving answer. Resorting to, "you need it to graduate" or "it's on your schedule" or "don't ask foolish questions," or any similar response is clearly inappropriate. If a teacher cannot give a deserving answer to that question, he or she needs to rethink the content and purpose of the course.

For content to be directing and sustaining, it must reflect diverse

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perspectives. Students from a variety of backgrounds must have the sense that their perspective is valued and that by engaging themselves in the topic, the study will be purposeful. Think how motivating it would be to students if they feel the course of study is a partnership with the teacher and that, by the end of that course of study, the instructor will have learned as much from them as they have learned from the instructor.

Interactions

Research has shown that not all students receive the same quality or quantity of interactions in the classroom. For example, high achievers tend to be given more opportunities to respond to questions than low achievers (Good & Brophy, 1971). Over time, the consequences of interacting more with one group of students than with another can be devastating. Thus, if a teacher expects to have a social studies program where everyone is energized, interactions between teacher and students must be equitable. Students must know that everyone will be expected to participate in and contribute to class discussions. Some kind of technique, such as pulling popsicle sticks with the names of each student can help a teacher keep track of who has had an opportunity to respond.

Engaging the learner is again the first step, but students must be continuously directed toward the goal of the lesson. Interaction strategies presented in the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement or TESA program (Kerman, Kimball & Martin, 1980), such as Wait Time and Delving, are important toward this end. Wait time allows students to think about their answers. This demonstrates the importance a teacher places on the students' involvement in the lesson and in the kind of thinking behavior required to achieve understanding of the material. Delving allows students to rethink answers or clarify information. Helping students feel they have successfully contributed to the class lesson is so important in directing them toward achievement.

For students to sustain their motivation in a social studies program, additional interaction strategies are vital. Again, TESA provides two examples of ways to ensure that students stay involved in a lesson. In classrooms where the seating arrangement can be changed, it is important to do so. Teachers typically interact more frequently with the students seated in the first row across and those seated in the row down the middle of the classroom. By changing the seating periodically, all students will have the opportunity to sit in the "T" that is sometimes naturally, though unintentionally, preferred. In classrooms arranged so that the teacher can move around during the lesson, proximity to all students should be practiced.

Another means for sustaining involvement in a lesson is to utilize the interaction technique of feedback. Students cannot know how they are progressing toward the goal of the lesson without that important information. Returning assignments that have been corrected before requiring students to complete another certainly makes common sense. Unfortunately, with the demands on us as teachers, this is not always possible. Yet, more effective ways of giving students immediate feedback must be sought if we are to keep students persisting toward the desired end.

Strategies

The three components of motivation can also be applied to strategies utilized by teachers in the classroom. To energize students from the first day of class, teachers can let them know that their opinions about course content are valued. Asking students, "What do you want to learn from this course?" can involve students in the learning process from the beginning. This activity can also help teachers understand that their students may differ in terms of the goals they pursue.

On a daily basis, the ways to energize students about a lesson are limitless. Writing a "Thought for the Day" on the board that relates to the objective for the lesson is an effective way to set the stage for learning. Using a variety of "thoughts" from experts of varied backgrounds, to teacher-written ones, to student-elicited examples can reinforce the philosophy that a diversity of opinions is valued in the classroom. Seemingly small things, such as using colored chalk to write information on the board, playing music while students are coming into the classroom, or having candy mints in a bowl near the attendance sheet can make a big difference in energizing students.

Instructional strategies must also be considered with regard to the directing function of motivation. Remember, this aspect of motivation pertains to acknowledging the existence of a specific goal, believing one has the ability to reach that goal, and understanding that certain behaviors will lead to achievement. When selecting instructional strategies to use in a social studies program, teachers first need to refer back to the differing goals that their students identified. It is only then that teachers can begin exploring the possibilities of what works and what does not in meeting the unique needs of their learners. Finding a teaching strategy that best suits a students' learning style is vital because of the key relationship between motivation and ability. To perform successfully, students must be both motivated and have the necessary skills and knowledge.

A variety of teaching strategies can do much to sustain students' interest in the content. Psychologists have long studied the effects of change on motivation. The classic Hawthorne studies in the 1920s which examined the relationship between levels of lighting and working efficiency suggested that change was the most important variable (discussed in Saal & Knight, 1988). What is now known as the Hawthorne effect is an important reminder to teachers that change can make a tremendous difference in the students' behaviors necessary for reaching a goal. Thus, bringing in guest speakers can be a welcome change in routine as well as providing a different perspective so important in the social studies. Taking field trips, whenever possible, gives students a chance to learn in a new and different setting. Some teachers, recognizing the value of novelty, change something in their classroom every day. They encourage their students to find the "something different" that serves to hone keen observational skills as well as keep interest high. Certainly when the changes enhance the delivery of content or creates opportunities for better interaction, the benefits are greater.

A discussion of motivational strategies would not be complete without some attention given to intrinsic vs extrinsic rewards. Some experts, such as Alfie Kohn (1996), believe the use of extrinsic rewards can actually hurt the motivation to learn. They feel that eventually students look for the rewards because of learning and when the rewards stop, the motivation to learn drops. Rewards foster an "I'll do this, but what am I going to get for it" attitude. Others, such as Madeline Hunter (1990), do not believe intrinsic motivation is necessarily "saintly" and extrinsic motivation "sinful". Rather, she believes both are effective because of the direct relationship between behavior and goals; an intrinsically-motivated behavior will naturally be rewarded by successful realization of the goal.

The reality is that certain students seem to need some kind of extrinsic motivator for learning. If a teacher senses this is true, indeed "something extra" is required to electrify them into learning, then why not use every reasonable means possible? The critical element, however, is that the purpose of the extrinsic rewards must be clearly defined to the learner. Then, too, extrinsic rewards must be used carefully and in conjunction with intrinsic reinforcement.

Conclusion

A motivating social studies program for students is not unlike a motivating diet or exercise program. In each case, the participants must get energized. This will initiate the behaviors needed to begin the task. Then it is important that the behaviors are directed toward a specific goal and that participants understand the purpose of the behaviors in achieving that goal. Finally, strategies must be in place to help participants sustain interest and persist with the necessary behaviors. Without all three components, success is unlikely. In a social studies program, these motivational components must be considered not only in the content, but also in the interactions that occur between teachers and students and in the strategies employed to deliver content. Merging these concepts will provide a framework for creating a desirable and motivational program.

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